

Breaking Habits: Strengthening School-Based Management Through Action Learning

Old habits are hard to break. Close to two decades after the Philippine Department of Education implemented the School-Based Management (SBM) policy, schools were still struggling to unlearn decades worth of habits and ways of working that resulted from a centralized system.

Miggy Zaballero, a certified action learning coach, spent time interviewing Principal Antonio Miranda of San Vicente Elementary School, a local public school in Quezon City, Philippines. At this time, Mr. Miranda was in his 7th month of leading the school and they were in the middle of revisiting and reviewing the last year of their School Improvement Plan (SIP), a key document in the SBM initiative.

A closer look at the SIP revealed that some of the root causes identified in the document appeared to be symptoms of a much larger problem.

Sample root problem statement in the SIP:

Project Title:	Learner Enhancement Project
Project Problem Statement:	75% of the pupils answer incorrectly in Science Class Discussions
Project Objective Statement:	90% of the pupils answer correctly in science class discussion
Root Cause:	Lack of Ethical Values/Character among school children

The root cause ***“lack of ethical values and character among school children”*** seemed to be disconnected from the problem statement in that the identified root cause is first and foremost beyond the immediate and measurable control of teachers inside the classroom.

This pattern of wording and identifying root causes was consistent across the entire document as well - the root causes were beyond measure and control, the root causes appeared to be symptoms of a larger problem and some, as validated by the principal, seemed to be arbitrarily written for compliance purposes.

As a result of this, the impact was that the projects implemented did little to solve the issues that were identified. The school's performance showed little to no signs of improvement in the 3 years that the SIP was in place.

Digging deeper into this, further interviews with Mr. Miranda unlocked the following insights:

1. For the entire school, only 5-6 out of more than 75 faculty members worked on creating the document. Coming from a centralized process, the teachers were used to following orders from higher ranked teachers and principals within the system.
2. There was a lack of accountability among key leaders in the school - primarily at the Master Teacher level. Mr. Miranda observed that his teachers barely asked for help, resisted feedback when given, and did not approach each other. They were waiting for the Principal to give instructions that they will follow.

After the interviews, Miggy and Mr. Miranda agreed to explore the Action Learning process as a potential intervention to help his school.



The first step was to conduct two pre-sessions with Mr. Miranda and his Master Teachers. Across two sessions, 4 priority improvement areas were identified.

1. Lessen classroom distractions and disruptions
2. Increase involvement of parents and the community in the school

3. Motivate teachers to pursue professional growth
4. Innovate teaching instruction across all grade levels in SVES

More than that, the old root causes in the SIP that were related to the strategic priorities were also reworded:

OLD Priority Improvement Area	OLD Root Cause stated in the SIP	NEW Root Cause
Low Literacy	184 out of 460 or 40% of Grade 1 pupils are slow or non-readers. (+ 30% of G2 and 20% of G3)	There is a lack of academic focus on literacy achievement in the early grades. There is little to no innovation in the programs being implemented to increase literacy levels.
Low Numeracy	Pupils are taught to memorize rather than develop understanding	Teaching strategies are outdated and are not learner-centered.
	Pupils are inattentive in class	
	Pupils did not take the subject seriously	
Skills Training on Teaching Strategies	Lack of instructional materials provided/Teaching guides	Teachers lack the motivation to innovate, continuously improve their performance and seek professional growth.
	Teachers preferences and coming to school unprepared	
	Teachers refuse to attend training and workshop or enroll in graduate school	
Teachers attitude	Traditional way of teaching	

towards teaching	Coming to school for compliance	Teachers see teaching as a chore and no longer as a fulfilling vocation. Some teachers no longer see their value in their profession.
	Negative mindset/cannot separate personal issues at home and the workplace	
Classroom management	Inappropriate behavior of children; room not conducive to learning	Classroom management techniques are outdated and are not evolving.
	Pupils perform less activity, inactive learners, limited activities or unruly classroom	
	Teacher did not provide many opportunity for the learners to differentiated activities inside the classroom	
Low Achievement level	Individual learners; Teachers' factors – lack of instructional materials used; fails to complete the learning competencies	Instructional methods are traditional and not learner-centered. There is little to no coordination and planning among teachers regarding teaching strategies. There are too many distractions that hinder academic focus among the students and teachers.
Partnership with individual parent, SPTA, the	Weak partnership with the individual parents & SPTA and the community	

community and stakeholders	Lack of trust and confidence with one another; No regular meetings	Stakeholders do not see the value of the school and do not feel valued by the school.
	Unaware of the programs and activities of the school; no minutes of every meeting.	

From here, Miggy pulled in Management Strategies-Asia and WIAL Philippines to partner with San Vicente Elementary School to solve ten (10) of the most pressing challenges that the school was facing for that school year. For over 3 months, 10 action learning coaches worked with 10 groups of teachers in the school to tackle key problems and create concrete actions that the school can practice for the school year.



5 KEY RESULTS FROM THE INTERVENTION

1. **Increased participation** - for the first time in the school's history, the entire faculty (75 members) was involved in creating and planning the School Improvement Plan. A translated quote from a participant interviewee says: *"Because of this, I felt energized to participate. Before, we were never included in these discussions. Now, I feel more involved and eager to help the school and our students."*
2. **Increased motivation** - teachers reported that they felt more energized and engaged during the sessions. A translated quote is *"We hope that when there's a project, the conversations will be like this. Where it's not just one person talking but everyone is contributing and sharing their ideas. It makes us feel more excited to participate and be involved."*
3. **More openness and empathy among master teachers** - A translated quote from a post-intervention interviewee said that *"Before, it was easy for me to reject new ideas of others. But I realized that if I listened, and tried to understand others, it also encourages them to share ideas without fear."*

Another interviewee shared: *"I was always the first to speak up and share my opinions and ideas. It was refreshing to experience a process that encouraged me to ask questions. Because of this, everyone was listened to and in 2 hours, we felt like we achieved a lot."*

4. **Increased collaboration and accountability** - Mr. Miranda observed how the environment changed in the school. After the intervention, he observed the increased frequency of visits of teachers and master teachers to his office where they shared ideas and challenges, and he noticed more collaborative work from the AL teams.
5. **Better School Performance and a Leadership Award** - The school reported marked improvements in their strategic priorities over the course of the year. In addition to that, Mr. Miranda was awarded as one of the Most Outstanding Principals in Quezon City for the school year. He also completed the foundations of Action Learning program with MALC Tina Alafriz, as sponsored by Management Strategies.

Beyond the 5 results, this intervention proved that the power of Action Learning is not just in creating empowered and psychologically safe cultures, but it's also in its power

to break age-old habits that have been embodied across decades of reliance on centralized power structures. If in such a short amount of time, it helped bring teachers of a school together to work towards impactful projects for their students, imagine the possibilities of empowering principals and teachers to manage their schools better.

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